



sand feet above earth and back again—one giant leap for suburbia. (Mays displayed the surviving miniature chair in a sealed vitrine in the video, more an artifact than a sculpture.) As the comfy lawn chair—a symbol of bourgeois respite—boldly goes where no man has gone before, the audience is left wondering whether, in the end, the escape is more illusory than actual. (That old adage “Wherever you go, there you are” seems appropriate to the sentiment.)

Another kind of escape is the abjuration of will, the surrender to external forces that supposedly determine one’s fate. Such forces, subtle to Mays’s tongue-in-cheek sensibility, are represented here by the Magic 8-Ball, which the artist disassembles. In *Dissection of a Magic 8-Ball*, 2008, the purple liquid from inside one of these plastic orbs is poured into a round glass dish and scanned on a flatbed scanner. The mysterious dark sphere recalls both a culture in a petri dish and a vast, enormous and all-enveloping void. In *Map of the World (After Thomas Minster Fuller)*, 2008, Mays unfurls the icosahedral die that he disassembles within the Magic 8-Ball and arranges its twenty triangular faces—each adorned with such classic phrases as IT IS DECIDEDLY SO, THE FUTURE OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD—into a shape recalling Fuller’s Dymaxion map, which was introduced the same year as the toy, in 1946. Combing the Magic 8-Ball’s presumed prescience with Fuller’s rethinking of how to represent the planet, Mays nods to visions and cartographies of the past. Thus, with a trenchant and openhanded wit, Mays proposes that the quest for escape is as simple as reimaging the world around us, finding new possibilities in the commonplace.

—James Yood

ANTA

Alec Soth

KEMPER MUSEUM OF ART

Photographer Alec Soth seeks the American South neither in traditional small towns nor in the cities and suburbs of the New South but in the forest. His portfolio “Black Line of Woods,” 2006–2007, composed by the High Museum as part of its ongoing “Picturing the South” exhibition series, includes twelve images taken in secluded settings of seven Southern states. A sense of isolation dominates Soth’s work. Single figures, all male (his backwoods world appears to be free of women), are engulfed by their natural settings. In *S. J., Nubbin*, 2007, lush greenery overtakes an elderly man in a camouflage T-shirt. An Eastern Orthodox priest in *Resaca, Georgia*, 2007, bearded and dressed in a dark cassock, wanders meditatively through a leafless autumnal forest. Though dwarfed by the trees’ tall,

slender trunks, he anchors the composition, standing where the image’s diagonal axes meet. Soth’s stated focus in “Black Line of Woods” has been social outsiders, and while his images risk romanticizing the loner, the scenes’ stillness and quietude largely mitigate that effect.

Seven entries in the series do not feature men, but buildings or detritus imply human presence. A lone, simply built house at dusk, eerily lit by a single street lamp, appears against a looming dark forest in *Bardstown, Kentucky*, 2006. The forest floor in *Knoxville, Tennessee*, 2006, is littered with cardboard, beer bottles, a pill bottle, and a plank of wood bearing the messages LEPRECHAUN WAS HERE NOV. 1, 2006. and BITCH. J. J. I WILL KILL YOU. I AIN’T NO FAG. Though each of Soth’s images seems to have a story to tell, any narrative is only hinted at, not disclosed.

In some cases, Soth’s unpopulated pictures are so strange—and possess such formal refinement—that one wonders if they might not be staged. A giant disco ball hangs from a tree in *Enchanted Forest (36), Texas*, 2006. Just below, at the base of the tree, are an overturned Frisbee and a deflated basketball. These two round objects related to leisure activities form a triangle with the mirrored ball at its apex, a meticulous arrangement that seems more than coincidental. In *Enchanted Forest (45), Texas*, 2006, a lightbulb supported by wires hangs from the trees over a green blanket littered with dried leaves, referring, seemingly, to William Eggleston’s famous photograph *Greenwood, Mississippi*, 1973.

Soth states that although “there is some direction” involved in his work, his photos are not fully staged. Nonetheless, tension inevitably arises between the presumptive documentary facticity of the photograph and recognition of the ease with which digital photographs are manipulated or that many photographers working today construct their scenes entirely. In the end, however, it makes no difference: Soth’s images are rich, pithy, often poignant, and sometimes humorous—regardless of how they came into being.

—Philip Auslander



Alec Soth, *Enchanted Forest (36), Texas*, 2006, color photograph, 24 x 30”.

KANSAS CITY, MO

Dan Christensen

KEMPER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Whether delicately hushed or eye-poppingly intense, Dan Christensen’s abstractions unfailingly offer an ever-changing mix of incandescent colors, looping lines, giant dots, frothy patches, and loose calligraphies.

Christensen, who died in 2007, belonged to a group of painters who persisted in the legacy of postwar abstraction long after Conceptualism, video art, and other currents gained dominance in the 1960s and ’70s. And though the New York-based artist attracted the support of important critics, Clement Greenberg among them, and his paintings have joined the collections of more than thirty museums across the country, Christensen has only recently begun to attain the broad recognition his rich, multifaceted work deserves. Making a strong case for such heightened appreciation is “Dan Christensen: Forty Years of Painting,” a handsome memorial retrospective organized by the Kemper’s director, Rachael Blackburn Cozad. The show, which



Dan Christensen,
Serpens, 1968,
acrylic on canvas,
9' 4" x 14' 5".

traveled to the Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln, Nebraska, last month, features thirty-three paintings and a drawing, offering a compact yet comprehensive overview of the artist's lively career.

A Nebraska native who attended the Kansas City Art Institute, Christensen moved to New York in 1965 after a one-year stopover at Indiana University. He quickly fell in with the celebrated Max's Kansas City crowd, where he met art dealer Richard Bellamy, who offered to represent him. Originally a figurative painter, Christensen switched to abstraction shortly after his arrival in Manhattan, trying his hand first at Minimalism and then soon coming under the sway of the Color Field painters. But instead of staining the canvas, he seized upon the idea of painting with a spray gun, with which he could achieve shimmering, floating effects. Indeed, as Max Kozloff put it in a 1968 article in these pages, Christensen (and artist Ralph Humphrey) could aptly be described as "a species of abstract luminists."

At first Christensen's use of the spray gun was highly controlled, as evidenced in *PR*, 1967, with its carefully coiled, oscillating swirls of color. But his work quickly gained the relaxed, improvisatorial quality so wonderfully evident in *Mallee*, 1968, a big, breezy painting with seemingly aimless, curving lines of color on a white field. This approach climaxed in *Serpens*, 1968, an electric, roughly nine-by-fourteen-foot canvas in which bright loops are emblazoned on a shifting background of vivid orange and turquoise.

Christensen returned to spray-painting in the 1980s, creating such dazzling works as *5 or 6 P.M.*, 1994, with its gleaming orbs and effusive jolts of color, and the technique remains the best-known aspect of his output. But over the decades, his style and technique underwent a series of transformations, from the so-called plaid paintings, with their rigid portioning of color blocks (*High Barrier*, 1969), to the light, sometimes wispy pieces of the '70s (*Ridge*, 1976), to his scrape paintings (*Line Bind*, 1987), where he cut into thick strata of acrylic, revealing colorful layers beneath. Experimenting constantly, Christensen tried out a range of unconventional paint applicators along the way, which, as the artist's longtime gallerist Douglas Drake remarks, included "blasters, rollers, rakes, squeegees, industrial brushes, brooms, and weed-sprayers."

At the same time, Christensen was clearly influenced by the painters he admired; he echoes, for example, Kenneth Noland's targetlike forms in pieces such as *Triton*, 1989, and Adolph Gottlieb's "bursts" in *Coaxed Red*, 1994. Christensen's work was also marked, as catalogue essayist Karen Wilkin points out, by the energy, colors, and unpredictability of urban life. But no matter their source, such bits of inspiration were just fodder for further invention and exploration. Throughout his forty-year adventure in abstraction, Christensen's aesthetic remained unmistakably his own.

—Kyle MacMillan

ASPEN, CO

Fred Tomaselli ASPEN ART MUSEUM

The buzz around Fred Tom hybrids frequently centers o ephedrine, aspirin, saccharine, ceuticals, marijuana, and other assembles into kaleidoscopic pictures, one might infer that "constitute or symbolize "bein interested in depicting altered Tomaselli has also employed th ence to them) to surprisingly h ing such lesser-known efforts curated by Heidi Zuckerman Ja Museum with the Frances Yc Gallery in Saratoga Springs, N depth and complexity of Toma

Among the forty-one work eight of the artist's dazzling le understated black-and-white p exemplified the artist's most r astrology and the fallible logi nonfigurative portraits by ca resemble the constellations vis birth. After exposing the arra resulting imprint according to ingesting. Accordingly, *Portra wife*) depicts the stars in the si LATE, COCAINE, VALIUM, and p astral spot. At once esoteric an cally generated portraits atten ality through confessional recollections. And unlike Tomaselli's acclaimed eye-candy paintings, they bluntly employ language (versus contraband), or rather the act of nomination, to subversive ends. The idea of using language, and its rigid semi-otic systems, to unsettle meaning was also present in a later series of collages that, camouflaged in the basic composition of charts from ornithological field guides, presented bird bodies fashioned from images of jackets clipped from catalogue pages. *Order Passeriformes Famil Pityriasisididae*, 2004, for exa to name and classify the wor abstract beings.

In many ways, Tomaselli's nomic approach. While the m most notable figurative pain composed, Arcimboldo-like paint—the upstairs galleries e abstract compositions, with a